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Bang the Drum Slowly...

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Taiko is Japanese for "drum", but it's not that simple. Taiko is singular concentration in a high decibel environment. The drums are so noisy that a visitor is offered earplugs. It is frenetic, controlled, high-energy precision with a large dose of passion, and utmost respect for its Japanese roots. It's a performance combining martial arts with a pulsing rhythm that reaches into your soul, pulling out perfection. It is mentally, physically and spiritually exhausting...and its students love it!

Kensuke Sumii is the Sensei (teacher) of two taiko classes at Orinda Community Center. His students include a former Moraga mayor and other Lamorinda residents, as well as those from surrounding communities. Some follow Sumii to different locations for additional classes.

The taiko ritual begins before Sumii's students ever touch a drum. They bow and greet their teacher in Japanese upon arrival, dressed in comfortable, stretchy clothing. Some wear two-toed Japanese tabi socks; others are barefoot. None wear watches or jewelry. Class starts with yoga-like warmups, with the focus on loosening shoulder muscles, neck and fingers. Then bachi drumsticks in hand, students strike a pose beside the drum: legs apart and bent at the knees, arms poised. Sumii takes his place with a smaller gong-like drum and counts off the beat: "ichi, ni...ichi, ni, san--- hai!"

The room fills with what student Mary Beth MacLennan calls "the resonance of drums playing in unison." Taiko classes, says MacLennan "are a way of actualizing my Japanese heritage."

Student Lynda Deschambault loves "the workout and the focused concentration." But taiko's physical workout is only one component. Leslie Morelli says "it's a good brain exercise. There is no written music, so you have to memorize everything." She says it took the class almost a year to learn a seven minute routine. She compares playing taiko to learning martial arts, as she tries "to execute whole-body movements with the expected level of control and sharpness."

Drew Tamaki saw his first taiko group in southern California, and now attends related activities like the North American Taiko Community conference at Stanford. "They had a variety of drumming workshops as well as several taiko concerts," he said. He also recommends finding the Taiko Community on Facebook.

Lovelle Yano feels "something deep, internal and spiritual that occurs when playing," and finds that "the drum vibrations go deep into the soul."

Over and over, students strive to hit the same spot on the drum head. Seven drummers strive for perfect unison. Sumii corrects their efforts a vocal chant: "do-ko, do-ko, don, don."

Taiko originated in Japan as a way to summon villagers or send messages to armies on the battlefield. It became a performance art fifty years ago and migrated to the United States. The first US groups were established in San Francisco, Los Angeles and San Jose. Cirque du Soleil's Mystere features taiko drumming, as does the music soundtrack of TV's Battlestar Gallactica.

So bang the drum slowly, students, because taiko, like karate, says Lovelle Yano, is "a lifelong process." It is easy to get started, says Bruce Fukayama, and definitely helps in stress relief. And, he cautions: "watch out, you might get hooked."

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